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Political Involvement and Social Capital in Europe

Jan W. van Deth

Democracy relies on the willingness and competence of citizens to be involved in political decision-making processes. Usually political involvement is explained with socio-structural factors (education, age, gender, etcetera) and socio-cultural factors (value orientations, efficacy, etc.) at the individual level. Yet well-documented substantial cross-national differences on the levels of political involvement in several countries cannot be explained in this way. Two strategies have been developed to deal with this puzzle. Firstly, social capital – broadly defined as networks and opportunities to mobilise resources – is presumed to solve many problems, including a lack of political involvement among citizens, combining socio-structural and socio-cultural factors. Cross-national differences in political involvement probably can be ascribed at least partly to distinct levels of social capital. A second strategy takes a completely different approach. Here cross-national differences in political involvement are related to different degrees of politicisation in distinct societies; and the level of political involvement is a positive and monotonous function of the relevance of societal and political arrangements in a society.

At first sight, the social-capital approach can be tested with the use of conventional statistical models for individual-level data, whereas the politicisation approach requires the use of aggregate-level models to explain cross-national differences in political involvement. This depiction, however, overlooks the ambiguous conceptualisation of social capital as both an individual resource and a collective phenomenon.¹ The analyses presented here test the impact of the two conceptualisations of social capital and are based on the first wave of the *European Social Survey* (ESS 2002–2003). The set of countries includes 19 states: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.²

1 In order to distinguish these two variants clearly Esser (2000) proposes two different terms to replace social capital: »Beziehungskapital« (»relational capital«) and »Systemkapital« (»system capital«). For the »public-good aspect of social capital« see also the early remarks by Coleman (1990: 315–7).

2 The first wave of the ESS includes information collected in 22 countries. Since one of our main indicators for social capital to be used here is not available for Switzerland and Slovenia, these two

1. Measuring Political Involvement

1.1 Aspects and Instruments

Political involvement refers to the willingness of individuals to take notice of politics, irrespective of possible benefits or disadvantages. Political involvement as a broader concept covers four distinct aspects and measures. Political interest is usually measured with a simple straightforward question about the degree of political interest on the one hand and a question about the frequency of engaging in political discussions with friends and relatives on the other. Given that curiosity about politics might be closely related to the importance attributed to political phenomena, two other instruments for the relevance of politics in absolute and relative terms are used here.

The most commonly used way to avoid complications with the distinction between interest in politics and behavioural utterances or consequences of interest, is to register *subjective political interest*. This instrument is based on the self-description of the respondent of his or her degree of interest in politics. The question used in the ESS for this level of *subjective political interest* is: »How interested would you say you are in politics – are you (1) very interested, (2) quite interested, (3) hardly interested, or, (4) not at all interested?«

A second indicator of political involvement is based on a very clear expression of the *frequency of political discussions* with friends and relatives at the workplace or in clubs and organisations. For this aspect, the ESS used the following question: »How often would you say you discuss politics and current affairs? (1) every day, (2) several times a week, (3) once a week, (4) several times a month, (5) once a month, (6) less often, or (7) never?«

Even when people consider political phenomena interesting or speak frequently about political or public matters, it is not clear how important politics is for them personally. Many citizens will be more concerned with more important, relevant, fascinating, or less threatening or occupying matters than politics. In the ESS the personal relevance of various areas of life is measured with the following question and items: »How important is each of these things in your life: family, friends, leisure time, politics, work, religion, and voluntary organisations? (for each item: extremely unimportant = 0 and extremely important = 10).« The fourth item on this list offers a straightforward indicator of the importance and relevance of politics for the respondent personally. By using the score for this item, we obtain a measure for a third aspect of political involvement: the *personal importance of politics*.

countries are not considered. Furthermore, Israel is excluded in order to restrict the analyses to European countries only.

The indicator for the personal importance of politics reflects the relevance of politics for the respondent without considering other areas of life. Required is an additional measure of the relative relevance of politics (or saliency); that is, we need an indicator based on the position of politics among other areas of life (rankings). Each respondent has rated each of the seven areas of life mentioned in the previous paragraph on an 11-points scale. If politics obtains the highest score of these seven ratings, then, apparently politics is relatively important for this respondent – irrespective of the absolute level of his or her score. If politics obtains the lowest score of the seven ratings, then politics is clearly unimportant. In this way, we can compute the relative position of politics among the other areas of life – or political saliency – for each respondent.³

1.2 Political Involvement in Europe

Applying the four measures selected here to cover four aspects of political involvement, the existence of substantial cross-national differences is unambiguously confirmed with the *European Social Survey*. Figure 1 shows the percentages of respondents in 19 European democracies selected. For each country the share of citizens is depicted, who express a relatively high level of political interest, who are frequently involved in political discussions, who attach much importance to politics, and who consider politics to be salient. The four indicators clearly show that the level of political involvement is high in the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark, whereas extremely low levels are found in Italy, Greece, and Spain. For all other countries the four aspects show varying degrees of political involvement depending on the indicator selected. For instance, respondents in Luxembourg appear to discuss politics rather frequently and attach much importance to politics, but both their level of subjective interest and the saliency of politics are only modest. Another exceptional case is Greece, combining a very high level of political importance with low scores on each of the three other indicators.

³ Since ties are almost unavoidable, the resulting score for political saliency is partly based on the average score for all items obtaining the same absolute score as politics (see van Deth 2000).

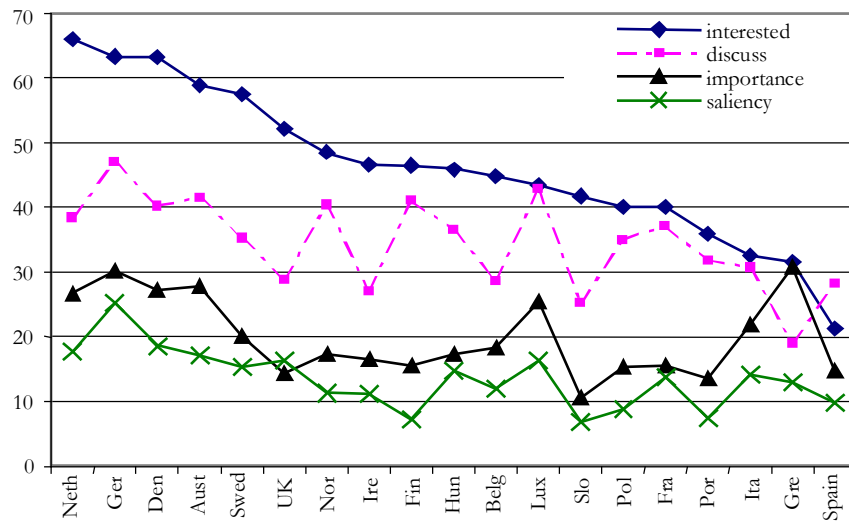


Figure 1: Political involvement in Europe (in percentages)

The graph shows the percentages of the variables: Subjective interest (categories 3–4 of 4), Discuss politics (categories 6–7 of 7), Importance of politics (categories 8–11 of 11), and Political saliency (categories 1–4 of 7).

Apparently, the four aspects of political involvement do not simply detect similar features of the same phenomenon, but suggest considerable differences between the countries depending on the specific aspect of involvement taken into account. The most evident cross-national differences can be observed for the level of subjective political interest. In the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark more than 60 percent of the respondents clearly pay attention to politics – the corresponding figure in Italy, Greece, and Spain is about half of that!

Particularly the cross-national differences in subjective political interest presented in Figure 1 are evident. Much less obvious is the variation between the countries if we look at the results obtained with the indicators of the frequency of political discussions or of the importance and the saliency of politics. In addition to the distinct levels of political involvement as indicated by the percentages shown in Figure 1, so-called empty models (or intercept-only models) are computed to estimate the intercepts and the variance components between and within the countries (Hox 2002: 16). From these variance components the differences between the countries are mainly due to variance within each country. For the four aspects of political involvement about 4–6 percent of the population variances can be

attributed to differences between the countries, whereas a much more considerable part of the differences is related to factors within the countries.

Although the distribution of political involvement in Europe appears to be highly country-specific, much of these differences seem to be related to factors within each country. The rough clustering of countries in well-established democracies in North-Western Europe on the one hand, and younger democracies in Southern Europe on the other, suggests that systemic factors are accountable for at least a part of the cross-national differences and that contextual factors should be considered as well. Yet the computations of correlations between and within countries strongly emphasize the relevance of within-country explanations.

2. Individual-Level Explanations

Explanations of political involvement usually start off describing factors related to *socio-demographic characteristics* of people. Therefore we include in our analyses as the most relevant factors at the individual level gender, education, and age (see Verba/Schlozman/Brady 1995; van Deth/Elff 2000). Several *political orientations* can be considered as a second set of explanatory factors (left-right orientation, efficacy) (see Verba/Schlozman/Brady 1995). As a third block of explanatory factors the *level of satisfaction* is introduced. The distinctions between the four aspects of political involvement are relevant here. Whereas subjective political interest and political discussion frequency are unlikely to be strongly affected, importance and saliency seem to be much more dependent on satisfaction (van Deth 2000: 130). *Media consumption* forms the last set of standard factors to explain political involvement.⁴

The crucial block of additional factors for political involvement incorporates several aspects of *social capital*. Social capital consists of structural as well as cultural aspects (van Deth 2003). Structural aspects are registered here with the degree of (informal) social contacts the respondent has as well as his or her membership in a voluntary association. For these associations the distinction between three broad types of organisations appeared to be highly relevant for political involvement: sports/leisure time associations, interest groups, and cultural organisations (Gabriel u.a. 2002: 159–65). Cultural aspects of social capital are measured by the support of

⁴ The data also include information about the consumption of political information (and not only media consumption in general). Since the consumption of political information can be considered as another indicator of political involvement, these variables are not used as determinants of political involvement here.

civic norms and values. Finally, the degree of social trust is included in the analyses as an indicator of the cultural aspects of social capital (see Uslaner 2002).

The first attempt to explain the level of political involvement of citizens consists of the use of a total of 14 factors included in the first four blocks of indicators as a base model for further elaborations, leaving the social capital factors aside. The results of the multiple regression analyses for each of the four aspects of political involvement show that relatively strong effects can be observed for the conventional socio-demographic factors gender and education, and these effects all tend towards the expected direction (males and higher educated people are more involved). For age, the picture is somewhat less clear, with increasing levels of subjective interest, importance and saliency of politics among older people, whereas discussion frequency shows the expected curvy-linear relationship with age. Surprisingly, income does not seem to be very relevant for political involvement (after education, age and gender are included in the models). People engaged in church activities appear to consider politics as not very salient (negative coefficients) or, to phrase this observation differently, apparently religion plays a much more important role in their life than politics does (cf. van Deth 2006: 111). Among the factors included in the remaining three blocks consistent substantial effects can be noted for efficacy (especially external efficacy) and for newspaper reading. As expected, people with higher levels of efficacy and people reading newspapers are more involved in politics than less efficacious people or people not reading newspapers. TV watching does not seem to be related to political involvement. The total amount of variance explained by these base models range from 14 up to 23 percent, which is not very impressive, but not unusual for this type of analyses.

In order to assess the contribution of social capital to the explanations of the various aspects of political involvement, the four base models are extended with a block of social capital indicators as individual-level determinants. Although several coefficients are significant, the impact of social capital factors is limited. Only support for civic norms and values seems to have some impact on subjective interest, discussion frequency, and the importance of politics. For these three aspects of political involvement the addition of social capital variables leads to an improvement of the fit of the models. The maximum gain is obtained for the importance of politics (an improvement of 4 percent points).

3. Macro-Level Explanations

After considering micro-level explanations for political involvement we now turn to relationships at the macro level. As with the models at the individual level, the social

capital factors will be added separately in order to trace the specific contribution of these factors to the explanation of cross-national differences at the macro level.

3.1 Selecting Individual-Level Factors

The base models at the individual level included 14 variables; for the social capital models this number rose to a total of 20 variables. Even without adding contextual factors, it is clear that we cannot estimate models including 14–20 variables with a maximum number of 19 cases (countries). In a first attempt to reduce the number of factors, instead of using the results of the pooled analyses the four base models are estimated separately for each country. For each of the four aspects of political involvement those factors are selected for further analyses that reach statistical significance ($p < .001$) in at least 13 of the 19 countries in these analyses. Further cuts appear to be possible without reducing the amount of variance explained in each country. The social capital factors are added separately in a second step.

The optimal models combine the most relevant individual-level factors for political involvement (gender, education, age, age-squared, church attendance, internal and external efficacy, and newspaper reading). The social capital variables are not able to improve the base models considerably: the maximum increase obtained by adding these variables is 4.5 percent points for the importance of politics. The fact that the addition of social capital factors appears to be rather unimportant at this level, could be due to a misspecification of social capital as an individual feature. This brings us to the selection of contextual factors for the explanation of political involvement in Europe.

3.2 Selecting Contextual Factors

Contextual factors for cross-national differences in political involvement include social capital factors as well as factors relevant to the politicisation thesis. Previous analyses (cf. van Deth and Elff 2001) clearly identified two main groups of macro-level factors for the explanation of cross-national differences in political involvement: economic development and state intervention. For these reasons, the analyses here are restricted to these two main macro-level factors in addition to the social capital factors:

Social capital

In a society where the aggregate level of social trust is high, for each individual the impact of having a high level of trust will be stronger, since he or she will gain a lot – or does not risk too much – by trusting other people. Since this conditional relationship between trust and involvement seems the most plausible one from an individual perspective, we will not introduce the level of trust as a contextual factor. The aggregate level of trust in a society is seen as a conditional factor. In a similar way, the impact of civic norms and values at the micro level most likely depends on the aggregate level of the support of these norms and values; that is, that relatively strong support of these norms and values will be especially relevant in countries where the general level of support is already relatively high. It does not bring much that you support norms and values if virtually nobody you meet supports them. For the structural aspects of social capital the argument is identical: the impact of social contacts and of engagement in various types of voluntary associations at the individual level depends, respectively, on the aggregate level of social contacts and engagement available. For each of these social capital factors, the aggregate level in a country is regarded to function as a conditional factor on the relationships between social capital and political involvement (that is, we restrict this part of the analyses to slope models and do not deal with intercept models).

Economic development

Economic development is a long-term phenomenon with time-lagged consequences. Therefore GDP per capita at constant prices, and purchase power parities to the U.S. dollar in the period 1970–2003 are used here. Furthermore, the sectoral composition of the workforce can be seen as an indicator of economic development (proportion of workforce in several sectors). A principal-components-analysis to test whether these indicators form a common dimension shows that all variables have high loadings on the component, which explains more than 80 percent of the variance. However, there is no reliable data on sectoral composition of the workforce for several countries. In order to obtain a straightforward indicator for economic development, the principal-components analysis is repeated on the basis of the two GDP measures only. A summary indicator of economic development is constructed then from the scores on the first principal component of this analysis, which recovers more than 97 percent of the total variance (communalities .973). These results are clearly in line with the results obtained earlier for a much longer period of time (van Deth/Elff 2001: 65f.).

State intervention

State intervention refers to the degree to which the state is involved in economic and social processes in a country. Government receipts as a proportion of the gross national product can be seen as an indicator of the degree to which the state extracts resources from society, whereas government final consumption expenditure as a proportion of the gross national product is an indicator of the degree to which the state provides benefits and services. The proportion of the workforce employed by government institutions and state-owned firms indicates the degree to which the state is directly involved in societal and economic processes. After considering various options to combine these indicators, the best strategy seems to be the use of two distinct measures: one for government final consumption and another one for direct state intervention based on the combination of the two other indicators. For this last measure of direct state intervention, the factor scores of the single factor consisting of government receipts and proportion of the working force in public services are computed.

4. A Multi-Level Approach

The analyses so far resulted in more or less satisfactory estimates for the determinants of political involvement at the individual level. Especially the various aspects of social capital can be depicted as contextual factors that have a conditional impact on specific relationships at the micro level. A multi-level model that takes these findings into account consists of various parts. First, we reduce the number of micro-level factors further by deleting variables with restricted impact only. In this way, a total of eight independent variables at the micro level for the explanation of cross-national differences in political involvement (four base model variables: gender, education, church attendance, newspaper reading; and four social capital variables: trust, contacts, norms, membership) is selected. Secondly, we have three macro-level indicators for the degree of politicisation of a society (economic development, government consumption, and direct state intervention). Finally, we have four social capital variables conceptualised at the macro level, which function as conditional factors for the respective aspects of social capital (trust, norms and values, contacts, and engagement in voluntary associations). A simple multi-level base model includes the eight micro-level variables only (with individual-level effects and compositional effects). In addition, the effects predicted by the politicisation thesis are included in a model that consists of the base model and the three contextual factors selected. In the last step, the four social capital factors are added

as conditional factors at the macro level. Notice that in this way the social capital factors do not have an impact on the dependent variables directly. Since social capital is conceptualized here as both an individual resource and as a collective good (see Esser 2000) these two effects are modelled explicitly in order to trace the consequences of both types of social capital as clearly as possible.⁵

The first round of model estimates includes separate analyses for the three models for each of the four aspects of political involvement.⁶ The first point to notice is that large parts of the cross-national differences in political involvement are directly linked to the distributions of the individual factors. About three-quarters of the variance in subjective political interest and 86 percent of the variance in political saliency can be explained at this level. Gender, education, and media consumption are strong determinants of political involvement, while political saliency is highly depended on church attendance. The impact of social capital factors at the individual level is clearly visible for the support of norms and values and for membership in voluntary associations.

For the estimates of more sophisticated models, the simple base models are extended with the three contextual factors selected. The impact of the three contextual factors appears to be rather limited and virtually none of the coefficients is statistically significant. Remarkable are negative signs for the impact of state intervention. Apparently, political involvement is *lower* in countries with high levels of state intervention than in other countries. Since this effect is especially visible for the importance of politics, state intervention seems to allow citizens to attach less importance to politics than in countries where the state is less active. Politicisation at the societal level – conceptualized as state intervention – apparently implies a depoliticisation of engagement at the individual level. That might be bad news for those in favour of fashionable assertions about a lack of political involvement among citizens, but these findings seem to support the idea that state activities enable citizens to focus on other themes and areas of interest and to ignore politics. That causes and effects are difficult to disentangle here is underlined by the fact that economic development comes along with higher levels of the importance and the saliency of politics: both depend on relatively high levels of economic development as well as on low levels of state intervention. The results for the inclusion of social capital factors as conditional factors are very disappointing. Whereas the individual level factors (that is, social capital understood as an individual resource) contribute to the explanations, the conceptualisation of social capital as a collective good does not add anything to our models. Ever more disappointing is the result that the

5 This means that for the four social capital factors considered as contextual effects, so-called »slope models« are estimated whereas »intercept models« are not taken into account.

6 All estimations are carried out with MLwiN.

inclusion of norms and values as a conditional factor has a disruptive effect on the models. Since all these results indicate the highly problematic role social capital plays as a conditional factor, no further model specification is considered.

5. Conclusions

Levels of political involvement appear to be surprisingly different in European countries. Apparently, neither the firm establishment of democratic institutions nor the rapid rise in competences (education) among mass publics has led to a convergence of the levels of political involvement. Only at a very general level, systemic differences can be noted between the settled democracies of North-Western Europe and the newer democracies of Southern Europe. This north-south distinction in political involvement is much more evident than an east-west line of demarcation.

Political involvement comprises subjective interest, frequency of political discussion, the importance of politics, and the saliency of politics. Starting with the presumption that individual features (i.e., standard socio-demographic variables) are not sufficient to explain cross-national differences in political involvement, the major aims of the analyses presented in this chapter were twofold. First, we wanted to see whether social capital contributes to political involvement of citizens, understanding social capital both as an individual resource and as a contextual factor. Secondly, the idea that cross-national differences in political involvement are related to differences in the level of politicisation in these countries is tested.

Cross-national differences in each of the four aspects of involvement can be mainly attributed to individual-level factors (gender, education, church attendance, efficacy, and media consumption), and to the cross-national differences in the distribution of these factors. Especially church attendance appears to be highly relevant for political saliency, whereas people with higher levels of efficacy and people following politics in the news are more involved in politics than less efficacious people are or people not following politics in the mass media. However, the general pattern suggested by the findings of the more sophisticated approaches is rather disappointing. Of the social capital factors, only the support of norms and values seems to contribute to the explanation of political involvement after the conventional antecedents at the individual level are taken into account. Neither social capital understood as an individual resource, nor social capital understood as a conditional effect at the macro level, appear to be very relevant for the explanation of any of the four aspects of political involvement.

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